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ABSTRACT

This paper identifies limitations of previous investigations of the relation between televised violence and viewer aggression and suggests a framework for future research concerning the effects of media viewing on child development. It is suggested that typical research is short-term, cross-sectional, and laboratory-based. Factors which mediate the effects of televised violence, such as gender differences, habitual levels of aggression, motivational states, age, protrayal of motives, format of the program and parental approval/disapproval, remain relatively unexplored. While studies indicate that positive behaviors increase in children after these behaviors are viewed on television, processes involved in prosocial behavior effects are unclear. Effects of prosocial television on children should be investigated. A framework for redirecting research efforts comes from life-span and ecological perspectives of developmental psychology. Longitudinal design permits the identification of cohort and time of measurement variables which are especially important in the assessment of media effects. Cumulative effects of exposure to media violence can be identified. Cohorts of children, with siblings used as matched controls, can be studied naturalistically in the family setting. Although risky and expensive, collaborative use of both life-span and ecological perspectives should yield vital information about the impact of television on the lives of children. (Author/RH)

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Television and Violence:

Methodological Issues for Future Research

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The relation between viewing media violence and the performance of violent acts has been documented in a wide variety of psychological investigations. Viewing violence on television in laboratory settings increases the probability that aggressive acts will be performed by research participants of all ages, social class backgrounds, and both genders. Furthermore, children who tend to be aggressive appear to be stimulated to even higher levels of aggression after viewing televised violence. Since the measurement of program content in these studies is generally restricted to physical aggression it is not surprising to find that the most frequent measure of viewer behavior is physical aggression. Here, the research has been focused in two areas. First, films which have actually been televised have been presented to research participants. Second, special films have been created for the research setting. The research findings using both types of films suggest that children repeatedly exposed to aggression imitate the aggression rather than releasing their aggressive impulses through catharsis. These experimental studies are supported by a number of correlational studies which find a modest relationship between aggressive behavior and the watching of televised violence. While correlation alone does not imply causation the available evidence suggests that no third variable alone can account for this relationship. However, methodological problems in television research limit the usefulness of these findings for understanding the behavior of children exposed to media violence in the natural environment. The purpose of this paper is to identify limitations of earlier research and to suggest a framework for future research that overcomes some of these limitations.

Much of the research on television has focused on the aggressive content of television programs. The effect of aggressive content is usually limited to the effect of physical violence on certain viewer behavior. Other forms of violence, such as verbal abuse and control, have generally not been considered as important mediators of aggressive behavior. Physical violence is so pervasive in prime time television that it is not surprising that subtle forms of violence have been ignored. Approximately 80 per cent of television shows in one sample contained at least one violent episode and roughly one-third of the shows were considered "saturated" with violence. Thus, children who watch television, even those who are infrequent viewers, are being exposed to this overrepresentation of violence in so far as television is assumed, by children, to represent reality.

Although a relationship between viewing media violence and violent behavior has been clearly demonstrated, it is important to note that a number of factors such as individual differences, program characteristics, and family influences mediate the effects of viewing violence on television. Factors which mediate the effect of television aggression include: gender differences, habitual levels of aggression, motivational states, age, portrayal of motives, format of the program and parental approval/disapproval. For example, most of the evidence for gender differences suggests that females are just as susceptible to modelled aggression as males but females tend to watch less violent television. The typical measure of aggression, physical aggression, may not be the most appropriate measure to assess effects in females exposed to violent television content. In reality females may not be less aggressive than males, or less affected by televised aggression than males; but few studies have examined concomitants to physical aggression such as hostility and attitude change. In sum, we know many gross effects of watching violence on television, e.g., that violence increases physical aggression and we know that for the most part these effects are negative, nevertheless, many of the subtleties of viewing violence are unexplored.

In our zealousness to point out negative effects of television we often overlook the potential of television for a positive influence on children. Research within the last ten years indicates that children also learn prosocial skills from television. Studies indicate that positive behaviors such as sharing, helping and cooperation increase in children after these behaviors are viewed on television. These types of behavior are, of course, mediated by the specific settings in which children are placed after viewing. The behavior of children isolated at home may vary greatly from the behavior of children immersed in a social environment at preschool. However, when investigators have attempted to conceptualize the processes involved in increases in prosocial behavior the empirical findings are unclear. Self-regulation or the ability to reflect on one's actions would seem to be a necessary precursor of prosocial behavior. In several studies using "Mr Rogers'Neighborhood" some investigators have found that children stay with tasks longer during free play activities after watching the program while other investigators did not find changes in task persistence, although prosocial behavior may have increased. Another area in which prosocial television has demonstrated beneficial effects is in the stimulation of creativity and imaginative play. Again, "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" is one show designed to achieve this goal. There is evidence that imaginative play does increase after watching a series of programs. The nature and function of fantasy in children's lives and the role that television and other environmental variables play in imagination is a promising and potentially productive area for television research.

It should be evident by this point that there are many gaps in the research relating to the effects of television on children. Recent events serve to illustrate these research deficiencies. One example comes from the murder trial of Ronny Zamora in Miami, Florida. The defense in this case argued that Ronny was temporarily insane due to "involuntary subliminal television intoxication."

His attorney, Ellis Rubin, searched for experts to support his defense but few were willing to testify. We simply cannot predict what will happen to any one child watching any one television program and there is certainly no evidence that any one specific episode of television violence leads to murder. What the aggregate evidence does indicate is that a troubled individual may be influenced by television in some undetermined way. George Comstock, former member of the Surgeon General's Advisory Committee, commented that after all the work that has been done on television research: "It doesn't make sense that we don't have anything to say that's relevant to the (Zamora) case." (1977, p. 4). Perhaps, then, what is needed are clinical studies, adopted from the clinical trials approach of medicine, which can document specific relationships between troubled children's behavior and their exposure to television. Not unlike other areas of psychological research the lack of longitudinal research on the effects of television violence is a major deficit. A question of primary concern is the cumulative effects of children watching TV during their formative years. Unfortunately, our findings provide information only on transient, short-term effects.

We have relied on a short-term cross-sectional approach to measuring children's responses to television in laboratory settings and in institutions. A major shortcoming of cross-sectional designs is the confounding of chronological age, cohort or generation differences, and time of measurement as illustrated in the hand out. Consequences of these effects are impossible to interpret in a cross-sectional design. For example, ten-year-old children differ from four-year-old cildren not only in terms of their respective age but each comes from populations or cohorts with different histories. Thus, ten-year-olds measured in 1978 may be very different from ten-year-olds measured in 1980. Cohort and time of measurement variables are especially important in the assessment of

media effects. Within the current population, different cohorts will have been exposed to varying amounts of television throughout their life and the content of different viewing years will produce different behavioral histories. In brief, research has focused on a single exposure or a series of brief exposures to television.

Another methodological problem with research on media presentations of violence is that the typical research paradigm consists of presenting a violent program to a child in the unnatural context of the laboratory rather than the setting where most children are generally exposed to televised, and real violence--the home. It is difficult to determine whether a laboratory sampling of behavior is representative of the child's "natural" behavior. The problem is further complicated by the fact that laboratory settings also remove the child from the context of the family. Setting and contextual cues in the natural viewing environment, such as the role parents play in the family, and how those cues influence behavior during the impressionable childhood years remain as additional gaps in our understanding of the effects of media violence on childhood socialization.

A framework for redirecting research efforts on effects of televised violence on children comes from two recent trends in developmental psychology, a life-span perspective and an ecological perspective. A life-span perspective is concerned with the description and explication of ontogenetic change in psychological development from birth to death rather than for chronological age determined periods of infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age. Growing out of a life-span perspective is a method for examining long-term change in human development. This method is well suited for assessing the effects of media exposure to violence. A life-span cohort-sequential design, for instance, allows for unambiguous assessment of age, cohort, and time of

measurement effects. In this design, different cohorts are measured on the variable of interest at different points in time. For example, using this approach we can assess the impact of cohort-specific events in the lives of children such as the introduction of non-violent educational programs like Sesame Street. Thus, it would appear that major gaps in our knowledge of the effects of media exposure to violence during childhood years can be corrected. Studies which incorporate a life-span perspective also bear directly on problems which can be examined at the more traditional level of direct effects of exposure to violence. However, the major advantage in using this method is the ability to assess cumulative effects of exposure to televised violence. Secondly, potential sleeper effects can also be detected with this model. A sleeper effect can be defined as the reemergence of some behavioral effect after an extended period of time during which the stimulus has been removed. For instance, does early life exposure to televised violence lead to increased aggression when the child becomes a parent? Finally, by utilizing a cohort-sequential design, one can explore how strong, age-related, media effects may or may not be dissipated through subsequent life experiences. Since television watching decreases with increasing age after puberty are the effects of television diminished as the child matures?

The second part of our framework from which to redirect research on televised violence is part of an emerging trend in developmental psychology derived from ethology--an ecological perspective. An ecological viewpoint considers the home environment as a naturalistic laboratory for experimenting and television is an important variable in the home. While observing behavior in its natural context, we also must attempt to manipulate the environment in order to understand the basis for behavior, e.g., by changing program content or varying whom the child is with when watching television. In addition, an ecological perspective is not inconsistent with a life-span approach.

Cohorts of children can be studied within the home and the family setting. For example, siblings might be used as matched controls representing different cohorts. Thus, studies incorporating a life-span or an ecological perspective, ideally both perspectives, should yield vital information about the impact of television on the lives of children. It should also be noted, that in order to carry out such a large research effort we need to consider new collaborative models, such as those currently used in the medical sciences, if we ever hope to seek answers to the fundamental causes of violence.

Ultimately, however, the responsibility for what is broadcast on television and viewed in the home exists at many levels. Society in general should accept responsibility for protecting children from known hazards, such as violence on television. This can be accomplished through government regulation, without violating first amendment rights of the broadcast industry. The television industry itself must make a commitment toward responsible programming. Their right to broadcast over public airways also entails certain obligations, one of which we believe to be is the protection and well-being of our children from possible harm. Families must also assume a responsibility for helping unsophisticated viewers choose appropriate programs. In the final analysis, research sophistication alone will not meet society's need for knowledge about violence. A commitment to seeking answers for what we perceive as vital questions about the effects of violence in the lives of our children either from a life-span or from an ecological perspective is expensive, time consuming, and intrusive on the lives of individuals. When new models and techniques are applied to old questions, unknown risks are also present. Nevertheless, the importance of the problem seems to justify both the costs and the risks.

TELEVISION AND VIOLENCE: METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

(Hollenbeck and Susman)

CROSS-SECTIONAL DESIGN SHOWING TIME OF ASSESSMENT
(Different age groups are assessed at the same point in time)

COHORT	CHRONOLOGICAL AGE				
	8	9	10	11	12
1966	1978				
1967		1978			
1968			1978		
1969				1978	
1970					1978

LONGITUDINAL DESIGN SHOWING TIMES OF ASSESSMENT
(The same age is assessed at different points in time)

COHORT	CHRONOLOGICAL AGE				
	8	9	10	11	12
1966	1978				
1966		1979			
1966			1980		
1966				1981	
1966					1982

COHORT SEQUENTIAL DESIGN SHOWING TIMES OF ASSESSMENT
(Different age groups are assessed at the same and different points in time)

COHORT	CHRONOLOGICAL AGE				
	8	9	10	11	12
1970	1978	1979	1980		
1969		1978	1979	1980	
1968			1978	1979	1980
1967				1978	1979
1966					1978